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Obama's methane rule an aggressive step toward tackling climate change

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White House announces new regulations to cut methane emissions – a climate pollutant – from the oil and gas industry almost in half

The Obama administration announced on Thursday new rules to cut methane emissions from the oil and gas industry almost in half – tackling a powerful climate pollutant in the president's final months in the White House.

The rules, stronger than earlier proposals, are aimed at reducing methane emissions from the US by 40% to 45% over 2012 levels by 2025 by requiring companies to capture gas from oil wells, and find and plug pipeline leaks. America is currently the world's largest oil and gas producer.

“We are really getting at a strong contributor to climate change. We are really getting at a source of toxic emissions that affect



Oil pumps and natural gas burn off in Watford City in North Dakota as the US is currently the world's largest oil and gas producer. Photograph: Charles Rex Arbogast/AP

public health,” Gina McCarthy, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, told reporters.

However, McCarthy indicated it was now unlikely the administration would have time to put in place rules on nearly 1m existing oil and gas wells and other facilities before Obama leaves office.

The regulations apply only to new and modified oil and gas infrastructures.

Even so, administration officials cast the new rules – which had been in the works for over a year – as a sign of Obama's comprehensive plan to fight climate change.

Those efforts include the first rules cutting carbon emissions from power plants as well as measures reducing tailpipe emissions from cars and trucks.

“We think these are tremendous steps forward to reduce methane emissions. We are going to keep moving forward as this president wants us to do,” McCarthy said.

Mark Brownstein, who heads the climate and energy program at the Environmental Defense Fund, said curbing methane emissions was an important part of that effort.

The climate pollutant is more than 80 times as warming as carbon dioxide over 20 years, and on its own responsible for about a quarter of global warming to date. “It means the United States is really doing this,” he said. “It’s an important first step in addressing global emissions.”

The US and Canada agreed to act jointly to cut methane emissions at a White House meeting in March. “With the US and Canada you have got the world’s first and fourth producers now committed to addressing this issue,” Brownstein said.

The new rules require companies to put more efforts in detecting and repairing leaks in oil and gas wells, pipeline and other infrastructure – with quarterly inspection reports. Companies will also have to carry out such inspections at low-producing sites – a provision that was not in earlier drafts, and was hailed by some campaigners.

“The Obama administration improved the methane rule after facing intense pressure over the weak initial proposal,” Anna Moritz of the Center for Biological Diversity said. “But there are still some missed opportunities for reducing the oil and gas industry’s massive pollution problem.”

The 350.org campaign group welcomed the rules but added: “One thing remains clear: no amount of regulation can make fracking safe.”

The American Petroleum Institute, the main oil and gas lobby, maintained that the industry was plugging leaking wells and pipelines anyway – and that the new rules would stifle innovation. “Imposing a one-size-fits-all scheme on the industry could actually stifle innovation and discourage investment,” the lobby group said in a statement.

The White House admitted the administration had at first underestimated the scale of methane emissions from the thousands of new wells put into production during the fracking boom – which transformed the US into an energy superpower.

The US has also experienced devastating methane leaks from ageing oil and gas infrastructure – such as the Aliso Canyon storage site in California. The leak was the single largest source of climate pollution in California last year.